

KEYS SANCTUARY LAST REFUGE FOR FLORIDA SHARK FEEDING DIVES

Key Largo, FL. If you want to legally participate in a Florida shark-feeding dive these days, there's only one place left to go - the federal portion (waters more than 3 miles from shore) of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary (FKNMS).

Ironically, this last remaining haven for diving thrill seekers is part of one of our nation's federally mandated marine protected areas, established by Congress under the National Marine Sanctuaries Act of 1972 with a primary objective of protecting marine resources.

The feeding of all marine life by divers in all State marine waters of Florida - including the approximately 2/3 of the FKNMS that lies within three miles of shore - has been strictly prohibited since January 2002 when a ban imposed by the Florida Fish and Wildlife Conservation Commission took effect.

That rule was unanimously passed and adopted because (according to Commission Chairman David Meehan), "Feeding marine life disrupts the natural behavior and feeding habits of fish and other animals. That is not in the best interests of marine life"

Similar prohibitions on shark feeding dives (and in some cases all fish-feeding activities) have been passed in recent years by marine resource protection agencies in the State of Hawaii, the Cayman Islands, South Africa, Egypt's coast of the Red Sea to name a few. Last year, the United Nations Environmental Program advised divers to stop feeding fishes to protect coral reefs.

Nonetheless, the FKNMS has yet to act to afford its finny residents such protection. About 1/3 of the FKNMS waters - including most of the Sanctuary's coral reefs - lie beyond state jurisdiction.

Environmentalists are not happy with the situation. The Marine Safety Group (MSG) - the environmental group that led the Florida fight to prohibit feeding dives - continues to encourage FKNMS Superintendent Billy Causey to move as expeditiously as possible to see that NOAA compliments the Florida measure.

"Dive tour operators in the FKNMS continue to feed sharks, barracudas, and other fishes 18 months after such activities became illegal in State waters!" said Bob Dimond, President of the MSG.

"NOAA's National Marine Sanctuary Program should have been the leader - not the follower - on this issue," Dimond continued. "They have known about this problem for years and have done nothing."

Indeed Mike White, who managed the Key Largo National Marine Sanctuary (predecessor of the FKNMS) nearly 15 years ago adopted an official Sanctuary policy of "discouraging" the practice of fish feeding in 1988, stating that "We are adamantly opposed to hand-feeding fish for several reasons. One is that it changes the fishes natural behavior."

Among the other reasons, White cited unnecessary threats to the safety of Sanctuary visitors; just a week earlier a visiting diver lost most of his thumb to a previously "fed" barracuda that took the wrong cue when the diver gave the traditional signal to surface.

Dimond believes that the underlying reason for Causey's (and NOAA's) apparent reluctance to take a stand on this controversial issue is an unwillingness to anger Florida Keys sport diving interests, who boast "more dive shops per mile" than any other area in the world and have a long history of vehement opposition to government regulation.

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